

Master's in Philosophical Knowledge:  
Foundations, Methods, Applications

Bergamo  
Pavia

## 2. Social Epistemology

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# lecture aims

- to introduce two conceptions of social epistemology:
  - individual–social epistemology
  - social–social epistemology

## *testimony*

- to introduce the problem of testimony
- to look at reductionism and anti-reductionism about testimony
- to consider analogies with other sources of belief/knowledge

## *group belief and knowledge*

- to introduce the problems of testimony—reductive and non-reductive approaches
- to consider the possibility and nature of group belief and knowledge

# social epistemology

two kinds of social epistemology

one is concerned with individual epistemology (individual knowing, justification) in a social context

*individual–social epistemology*

the other is concerned with the social group as an entity that can have epistemic states

*social–social epistemology*

# the importance of testimony

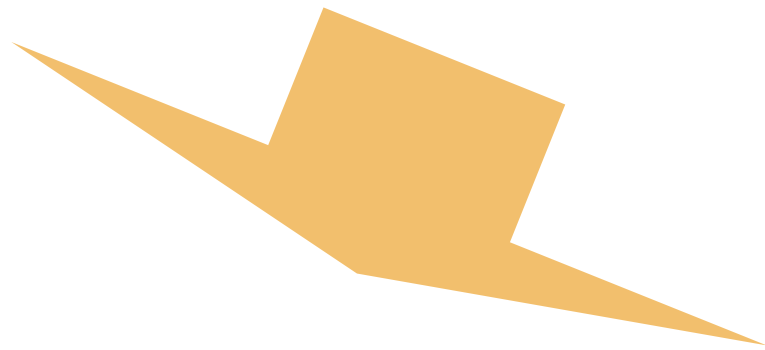
“there is no species of reasoning more common, more useful, and even necessary to human life, than that which is derived from the testimony of men, and the reports of eyewitnesses and spectators” (Hume)

you now believe that Hume wrote this  
your belief is based on testimony  
is that belief justified?  
does it amount to knowledge?

almost all the interesting things you know (or believe you know) come from testimony

# the importance of testimony

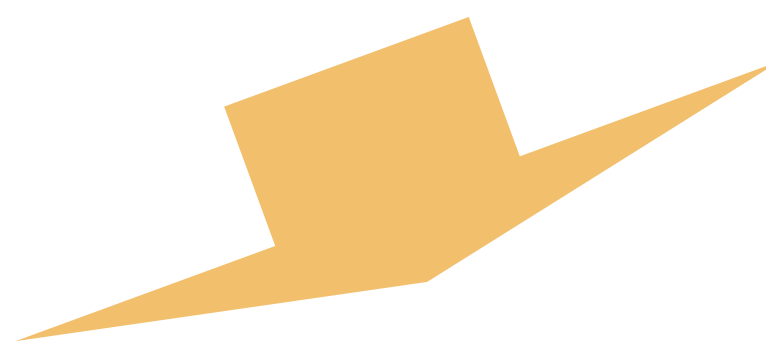
how is a belief gained from testimony justified?  
can it amount to knowledge?



testimonial belief is justified  
when one possesses evidence  
of the reliability of testifiers

*reductionism*

*Hume*



testimonial beliefs can be  
justified by other (e.g.  
apriori) means

*anti-reductionism*

*Reid*

# reductionism

testimonial belief is justified  
when one possesses evidence  
of the reliability of testifiers

$S$  asserts that  $p$   
 $S$  is a reliable informant  
*therefore*  
 $p$



# reductionism

problem 1 — the paucity of evidence

we rarely have enough evidence to  
judge the reliability of a testifier

# reductionism

problem 2 — circularity

what evidence we do have about  
reliability itself comes from  
testimony

# reductionism

problem 3 — iterated testimony

chain of testimony: A to B to C to D to E

B is justified if she can show A to be reliable

C is justified if she can show B to be reliable

B's being reliable is a matter of being able correctly to judge A to be reliable

so C is justified if she can show B to be reliable in correctly judging testifiers like A to be reliable

D is justified if she can show C to be reliable

C's being reliable is a matter of being able correctly to judge B to be reliable

*...continued ...*

so D is justified if she can show C to be reliable in correctly judging testifiers like B to be reliable in judging testifiers like A to be reliable

so E is justified if she can show D to be reliable in correctly judging testifiers like C to be reliable in judging testifiers like B to be reliable in judging testifiers like A to be reliable

# reductionism

a defence of reductionism

our general practice of accepting testimony rarely leads to false beliefs

the best explanation of this is that this practice is reliable

(perhaps we learn something about human nature?)

# reductionism

a defence of reductionism

our general practice of accepting testimony rarely leads to false beliefs

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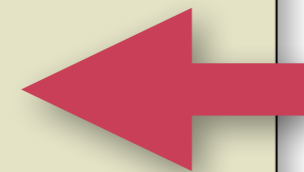
however, is the small proportion of the testimony that we can verify a good indicator of the truth of the remainder?

the defence assumes 'the uniformity of testimony' (or uniformity of human nature)

# reductionism

testimonial belief is justified  
when one possesses evidence  
of the reliability of testifiers

*S* asserts that *p*  
*S* is a reliable informant  
*therefore*  
*p*



the major premise cannot be justified;  
hence we should be sceptical about knowledge from testimony

# reductionism

“there is no species of reasoning more common, more useful, and even necessary to human life, than that which is derived from the testimony of men, and the reports of eyewitnesses and spectators” (Hume)

“What in them was Science, is in us but Opiniatritry ...In the Sciences, every one has so much as he really knows and comprehends: What he believes only, and takes upon trust, are but shreads; which however well in the whole piece, make no considerable addition to his stock, who gathers them. Such borrowed Wealth, like Fairy-money, though it were Gold in the hand from which he received it, will be but Leaves and Dust when it comes to us.” (Locke)

# anti-reductionism

can knowledge from testimony be saved from scepticism  
by a non-reductive justification of testimonial belief?

# anti-reductionism

analogy with perception

we should think of testimony as like perception and memory in being a foundational source of knowledge

we have a default entitlement to accept testimony

however, the key question is whether we have a reason to think that accepting testimony is truth-conducive

being foundational, providing a default entitlement do not show testimony to be truth-conducive

# anti-reductionism

analogy with perception

we should think of testimony as like perception and memory in being a foundational source of knowledge

we have a default entitlement to accept testimony

do we have a default entitlement to accept perception?

do not sceptical problems indicate that we should not default to accepting perception?

# anti-reductionism

analogy with perception

we should think of testimony as like perception and memory in being a foundational source of knowledge

we have a default entitlement to accept testimony

however, the a posteriori justification of perception is much stronger (perception is more uniform, a larger proportion of perceptual beliefs can be corroborated)

# anti-reductionism

Burge's apriori defence of entitlement

a piece of testimony is intelligible and presented as true



evidence of the rationality of the testifier



rationality is truth-conducive



there is some reason to believe the piece of testimony, absent reasons to doubt it

# an analogy with the problem of induction

how is a belief gained from testimony justified?  
can it amount to knowledge?

testimonial belief is justified  
when one possesses evidence  
of the reliability of testifiers

*reductionism*

*Hume*

testimonial beliefs can be  
justified by other (e.g.  
apriori) means

*anti-reductionism*

*Reid*

# an analogy with the problem of induction

how is a belief gained from induction justified?  
can it amount to knowledge?

inductive belief is justified when  
one possesses evidence of the  
reliability of induction

*Hume*

circularity, scepticism

inductive beliefs can be  
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*Kant, Strawson*

no link to truth-conduciveness

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*Hume*

(circularity) scepticism

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*Reid, Burge*

no link to truth-conduciveness

interaction between testimony and induction, uniformity of testimony

how is a belief gained from induction justified?  
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Reid, Burge

no link to truth-conduciveness

is being (in principle)  
able to provide such a  
justification a  
condition on being  
justified?

*i.e. epistemological  
internalism*

# collective/social knowing and belief

The pure maths group in our department hopes that within five years it will know whether the Riemann hypothesis is true.

The North Koreans know how to build an atomic bomb.  
(Or: North Korea knows how to build an atomic bomb.)

We now know that peptic ulcer is often caused by the bacterium *Helicobacter pylori*.

The world knows that global warming is a major threat.

The growth of scientific knowledge has been exponential since the scientific revolution.

# two approaches to social knowing

**the supervenience  
approach**

**the commitment  
model**



Gilbert, Tuomela

**the analogy  
approach**

**the distributed  
model**



# two approaches to social knowing

## the supervenience approach

### the commitment model

$G$  believes that  $p$  when the individuals in  $G$  are jointly committed to the proposition that  $p$  as being the view of  $G$ .  
 $G$  knows that  $p$  when it believes that  $p$  and additional epistemic conditions are met

Gilbert, Tuomela

## the analogy approach

### the distributed model

$G$  knows that  $p$  when  $G$  has (or is) a properly functioning cognitive system, of which the proposition that  $p$  is a product.

## some claims

- social knowing in science does not satisfy the commitment model, but it does satisfy the distributed model, confirming the analogy approach
- the supervenience approach is falsified by counterexamples from science
- social knowing in science really is the possession of knowledge by a genuine social entity

# the summative model

“To ascribe mental predicates to a group is always an indirect way of ascribing such predicates to its members.” (Quinton)

simplest version of the supervenience approach

# the summative model

it is socially known that  $p$   
iff

it is widely known that  $p$   
(all or most people individually know that  $p$ )  
(‘mutual’ knowledge)

# the summative model

“The Zuni tribe knows that the sky is blue”

This is false, according to the commitment model, hence there is mutual knowledge without social knowing

But that cannot accommodate group reasoning

# the summative model

mutual knowledge not **necessary** for social knowing

division of cognitive labour, specialization

# the summative model

mutual knowledge not **sufficient** for social knowing

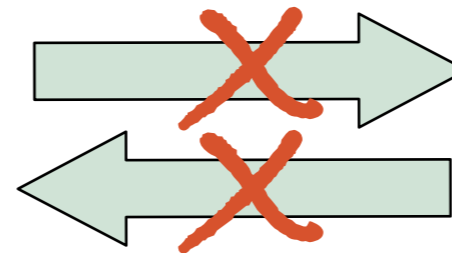


# the summative model

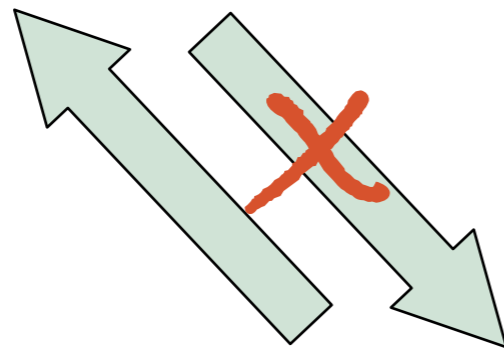
*Emperor's New Clothes*

**mutual knowledge**

**social knowing**



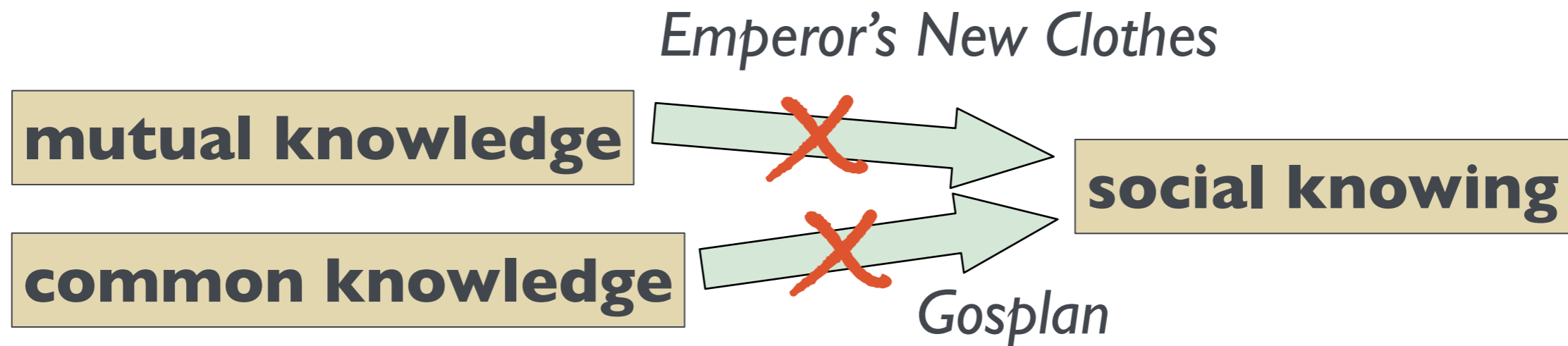
*division of  
cognitive labour*



*Gosplan*

**common knowledge**

# the summative model



- lack of group commitment/collective acceptance?  
(the commitment model)
- lack of social function?  
(the distributed model)

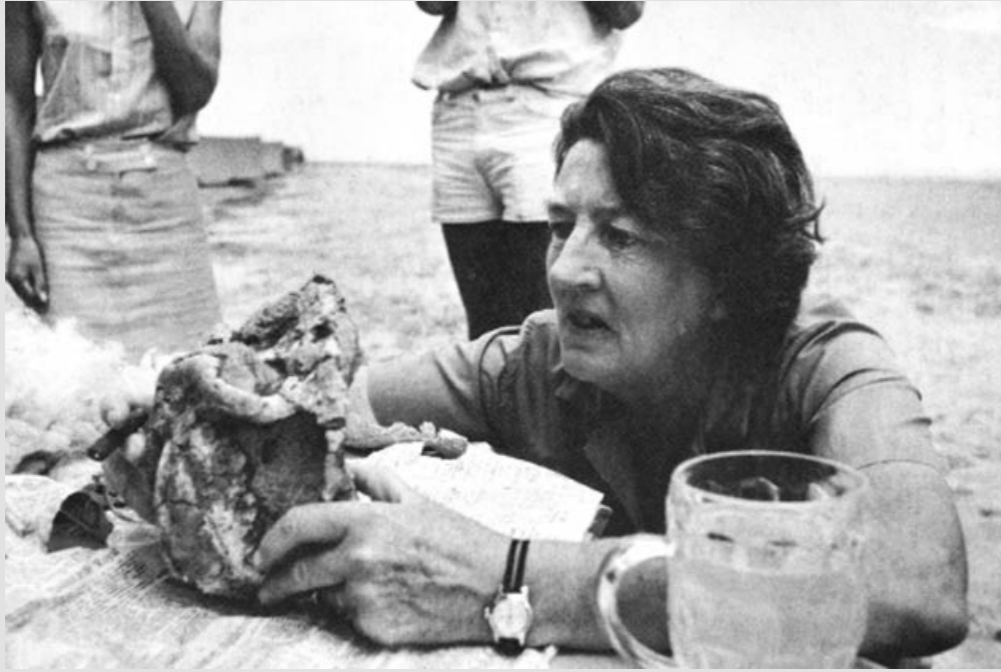
# **the commitment model vs the distributed model**

does either the commitment model or the distributed model provide a satisfactory model of social knowing in science?

# the commitment model and science

the commitment model ...

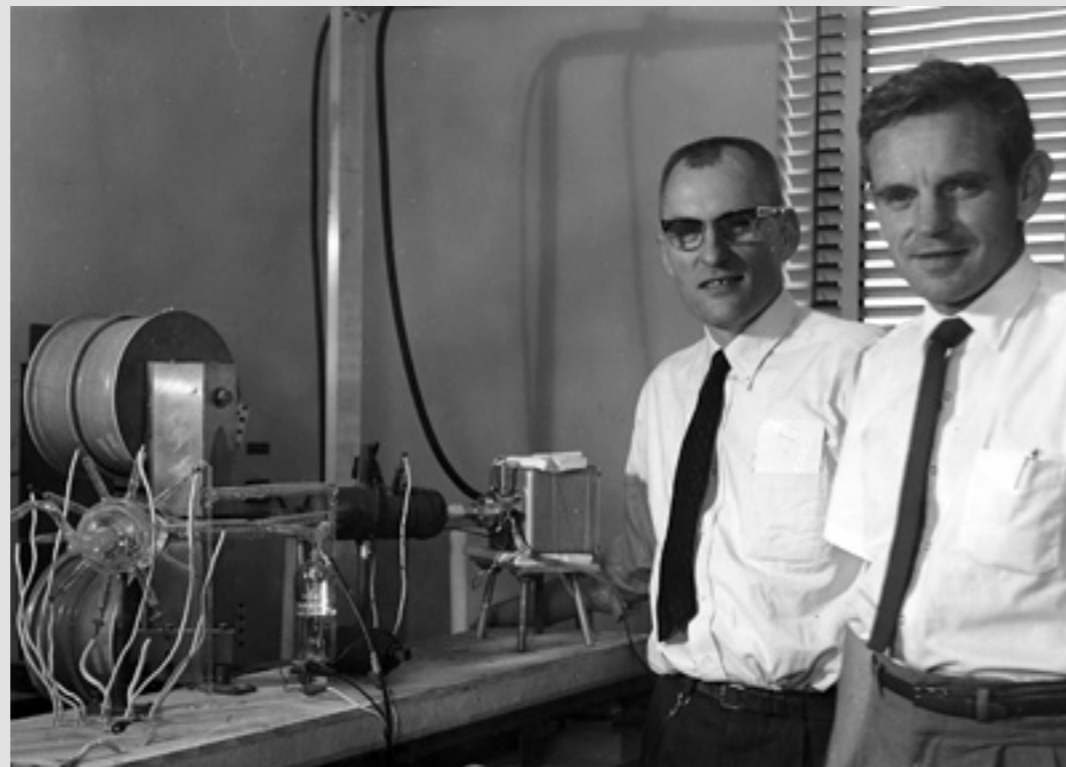
*may* be true of some small research groups



Mary Leakey



Louis Leakey, Zinj, and Mary Leakey



Mass spectrometer, Garniss Curtis, and Jack Evernden

# the commitment model and science

the commitment model ...

*may* be true of some small research groups

but is not true of large research projects

(Karin Knorr Cetina)

and

is not true of wider science

# the commitment model and science

"One can speak of knowledge in an impersonal sense: it is accepted as knowledge that copper expands when heated" (Tuomela)

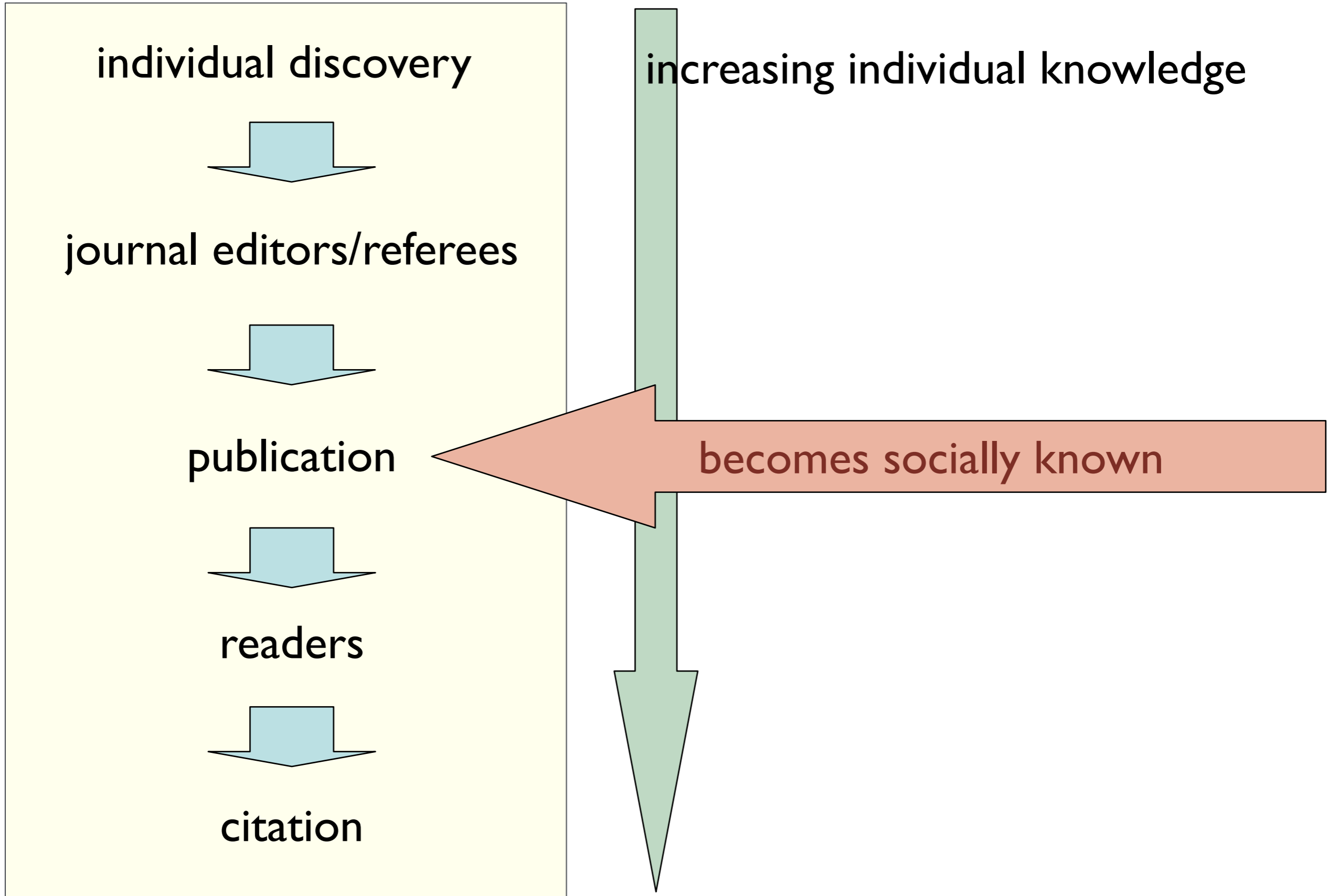
# the supervenience thesis

“... a group cannot know unless at least some of its members know the item in question. The general ground for this assumption is that group properties supervene on their members’ relevant properties.” (Tuomela)

# the supervenience thesis

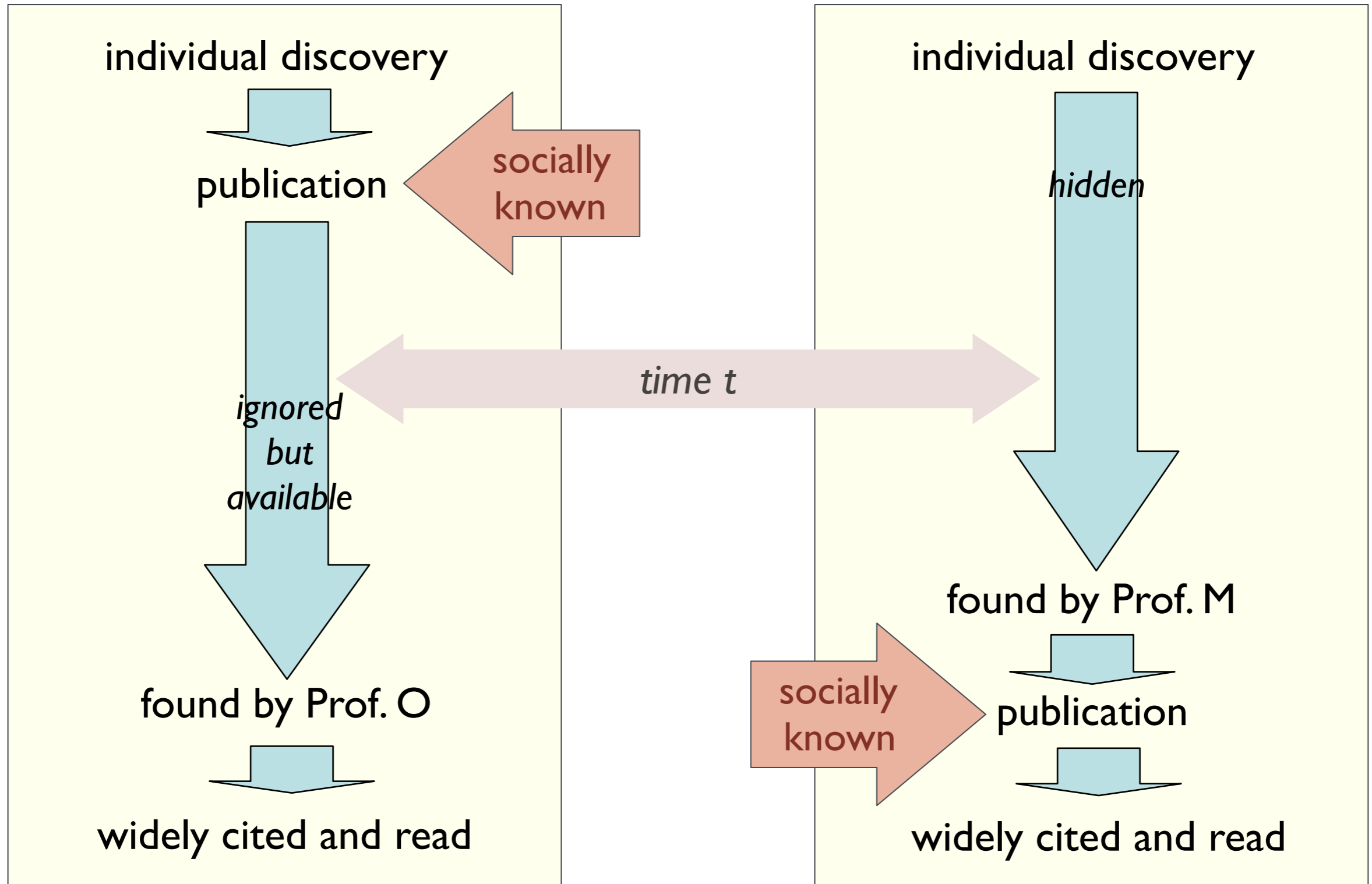
(SUP) The social supervenes on the individual

(SUP-K) Social knowing (like other group attitudes) supervenes on the mental states (and actions) of individuals



Dr N

Dr Q



# the supervenience thesis

(SUP) The social supervenes on the individual

(SUP-K) Social knowing (like other group attitudes) supervenes on the mental states (and actions) of individuals

Collingwood, Sellars, Tuomela, Kincaid, List & Pettit, Schmitt, Stalnaker ...

but see Epstein, Mellor

# the discursive dilemma

	<i>P</i>	<i>Q</i>	<i>P&amp;Q</i>
Judge A	T	F	F
Judge B	F	T	F
Judge C	T	T	T
<i>aggregate</i>	T	T	F

# the discursive dilemma

premise-based procedure

groups should vote/decide on premises and accept the conclusions that follow

but the group might not agree which propositions are the premises

e.g. S might believe  $P$  and  $Q$  individually as a result of believing  $P \& Q$

or for S the premises are  $P$  and  $P \rightarrow Q$  and the conclusion is  $Q$ , but for T the premises are  $P$  and  $\neg Q$  and the conclusion is  $\neg(P \rightarrow Q)$

# the discursive dilemma

the supervenience approach

the analogy approach

the commitment model

the distributed model

must address the  
discursive dilemma

discursive dilemma  
does not apply

# social entities as knowers

is there a genuine social entity that knows?

or fictionalist use of analogy?

organic solidarity  
(division of labour)

# social entities as knowers

is there a genuine social entity that knows?

scientific groups as cognitive systems



# conclusion

the supervenience approach



the analogy approach



the commitment model



the distributed model



# reading

see reading list at: [http://www.alexanderbird.org/Teaching/Reading\\_lists.pdf](http://www.alexanderbird.org/Teaching/Reading_lists.pdf)